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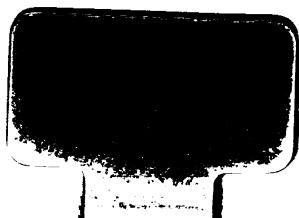
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ANONYMOUS CRITICISM.

An Essay

BY

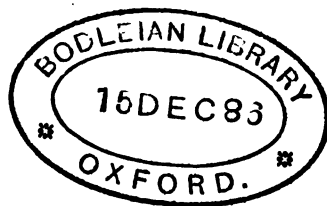
ROBERT BLAKE,

AUTHOR OF "JOAN OF ARC."

"Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!
Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,
Thou noteless blot on a remembered name;
But be thyself, and know thyself to be!
And ever at thy season be thou free
To spill the venom when thy fangs o'erflow.
Remorse and self-contempt shall cling to thee;
Hot shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,
And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt—as now."
ADONAIS.

LONDON:
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1877.

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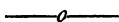
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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
THE EVIL ARISING FROM ANONYMOUS CRITICISM TWOFOLD	6
THE THIRD-RATE CRITICS	7
THE MORE PROMINENT CRITICS	10
THEIR CONTEMPT FOR ENTHUSIASM	12
THEIR INTOLERANCE OF ORIGINALITY	16
THEIR INCAPACITY FOR APPRECIATING THE SPIRIT OF THEIR	
AGE	22
REMEDY FOR THE EVIL	28



Anonymous Criticism.



That anonymous literary criticism is one of the evils of the day, few who have the real interests of literature at heart will, I am sure, deny; nor can the amusement caused by the tone of judicial severity, which even the most obscure critics assume towards the most prominent original writers, compensate for the real injury which critical vindictiveness has too often been able to inflict.

**The evil arising from anonymous criticism
twofold.**

The evil arising from anonymous criticism is twofold: firstly, that which the third-rate critics of the cheap metropolitan, and of the provincial press, have the power to inflict by forcing upon the public their own nominee, and by throwing every obstacle in the way of those who are too conscious of superiority to truckle, and too destitute of influence to obtain a hearing from the more candid writers who preside at the head of the critical profession; secondly, that too often caused by the more prominent critics themselves, by that contempt for enthusiasm, which is the most fatal sign of decaying energy in nations: by that intolerance of originality always to be observed in those who study the works and lives of the great dead, not to learn but to revere, not to weigh with discernment, but to admire without question: and by that incapacity for appreciating the spirit of their age characteristic of the learned, who ever see the present through the medium of the past.

The third-rate critics.

The first of these I shall dismiss with a few words, for though the evil done by the less respectable critics is great, still their power is comparatively circumscribed, as no amount of unprincipled puffing can long preserve trash from contempt, and no sneers of ignorance can long prevent real merit from being recognised. The consideration, however, that by their venal praise they frequently induce those who have ventured into print without possessing any of the qualities necessary for literary success to devote themselves to a career whose lowest honours are beyond their reach, and thus by depriving the country of the benefit of their labour in some more suitable employment to lessen the national wealth, is one by no means unimportant: nor must it be forgotten that the furious invectives of these "literary prostitutes" may sometimes cause the more sensitive,—and sensitiveness has ever been the peculiar characteristic of the literary temperament,—to turn from the profession in which they were sure to

rise, and rush into another whose duties their very delicacy may render them incapable of performing to satisfaction, thus entailing on themselves misery, and on the public loss; or they may drive the more determined into undignified recrimination, or what is worse, into misanthropy, and cynicism, so that, just as men are often unable to free themselves from the superstitious terrors inspired by the injudicious nurses of their childhood, thus writers who were at first full of warm patriotism and of overflowing humanity become, when the struggles which caused the change are only remembered with a smile, bitter scoffers at the disinterested, sordid advocates of expediency, and cold sneerers at the feelings which have been frozen within their own breasts, and at the fire which for them has burnt out.

The following is a curious example of the incapacity and presumption of the third-rate critics. An acquaintance of the writer sent some lines to a provincial paper, and after a few days had them returned with a polite note from the Editor, saying, that his critic did not

consider them good enough for insertion. He then despatched one of Wordsworth's best known and most admired sonnets, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing that it too had been deemed below the standard. Nor can we consider this an exceptional instance when we recollect that the remuneration these critics receive is what few able-bodied men would accept, that it is absurd to suppose that their ranks are recruited from any but the lowest classes, and that to these the language of literature is almost as unintelligible as the Cymbric to a tourist in Wales.

The remedy for this deplorable state of things is, in my opinion, that these third-rate critics should cease to be anonymous, for if their origins and positions became known the absurdity of their presumption would be too evident even for the simplicity of their constituents. Provincial editors would gradually adopt the safer and more economical principle of merely quoting the opinions of their more distinguished contemporaries, and the unfortunates, who now eke out a precarious livelihood by attacking others with all the intemperance

and morbid envy born of their own disappointments, would gradually learn that there was no longer a market for their manufacture, that the hoax had been discovered, their secret found out, and that it was now necessary to invent some other fraud by which to delude the public and support existence.

The more-prominent critics.

In considering the injury done by the anonymous writers of the more prominent critical papers, it must be remembered that while their tone is generally more moderate, still as their opinions have more weight the evil done is much greater than in the case of the third-rate critics, when those opinions are hastily formed and recklessly announced, and that this is unfortunately sometimes the case the following instance will show.

Some time ago the Marquis of Lorne published a poem entitled "Guido and Lita," for which his own exalted rank and his connection with royalty procured wide attention. A

long review of this poem appeared in the "Athenæum," containing very harsh and in some cases grotesquely-absurd strictures upon it, of which the following is perhaps the most remarkable. The critic found fault with the line

"To leaguer town and town with fire and sword"

for the eccentric reason that "leaguer" was not an English word, and that his lordship should have written *beleaguer*. Now the writer of the review might be excused for forgetting the fact that "leaguer" is not only an English word but is very frequently used by our best writers, though the carelessness with which the assertion is made is highly reprehensible ; but under no circumstances can he be excused for displaying positive ignorance of the subject he was discussing, and it was the grossest ignorance not to be aware that, even if the prefix had never before been dropped in poetry, it was quite legitimate to drop it, in fact that, according to the analogy of the language, it was inevitable that it should be dropped.

Contempt for enthusiasm.

The contempt for enthusiasm which I have named as the first of the great causes of evil arising from the high-class critics, must have been observed by all readers as one of the most prominent characteristics of the critical mind, and as enthusiasm is merely that courageous energy without which no nation could long continue to exist in independence, it is clear that those who direct their influence to its suppression do much to undermine the national strength. Enthusiasm should be moderated, not sneered at, directed, not checked.

Allied to the contempt for enthusiasm so often exhibited by critics is their contempt for youth, whose boldness they consider presumption, whose inexperience folly, whose knowledge they condemn as superficial, and whose promise they are rarely sufficiently clear-sighted to recognise. As instances of the injury done by this habit of critics, I may mention the untimely deaths of Keats and Chatterton, neither of whom reached the

maturity of his power, merely because his works did not meet with intelligent appreciation at the hands of critics. The very impatience of his obscure position, the very intolerance of neglect, which led Chatterton to rush to the surest and swiftest solution of the problem of existence, would almost sufficiently prove the presence of that conscious superiority, that "energy divine" which is ever associated with genius, even did not the imperfect results of his unpractised literary skill, which his critics so harshly condemned, tell us the same sad tale. The theory that Keats burst a blood-vessel owing to the violence of the emotions aroused by the savage criticism of his "Endymion," which appeared in the "Quarterly Review," is now generally admitted to be incorrect. Undoubtedly Keats was, at the time, far too skilful an artist to permit the condemnation of an anonymous critic to weigh for a moment against the decisions of his own judgment, but there is as little doubt that, had he obtained encouragement and appreciation, the care and comfort which public support would

have placed within his reach might have checked the progress of his disease, and prolonged for Great Britain so valuable a life.

And it was not alone upon these two great men who thus perished because none of those whose profession made it a duty to examine their claims could stoop to reach them a helping hand, or to smooth their way to that proud position which was their birth-right; it was not alone upon them that the injury was inflicted, it was on their countrymen also, for a nation's glory is its literature, and when Waterloo and Trafalgar have become but names with which to exercise the memories of boys, the works which Keats and Chatterton might have written, had they lived, might shine like stars through the night of time, well worthy to adorn the constellation to which "Paradise Lost" and "Hamlet" belong.

Before passing to the next branch of my subject I shall pause to relate a circumstance which, though it can scarcely be said to belong to the evidence against anonymous

criticism, is too good an illustration of critical incapacity for appreciating youthful genius to be passed over in silence. When Rachel, certainly one of the greatest tragic actresses the world has seen, was studying under M. Provost, that gentleman so entirely failed to foresee her destined greatness that he, on one occasion, informed her that she would never act, that she had the voice of a costermonger: "Go, child, go," cried the irascible professor, "and sell bouquets; it is all you will ever be fit for." Rachel remembered this expression of opinion, and one evening, when she was almost overwhelmed with bouquets presented by a rapturous audience, she carried them to M. Provost, and laughingly reminding him of his prophecy offered to dispose of her trophies to him if he could afford to buy them.

Intolerance of Originality.

Intolerance of originality is even more invariably characteristic of critics than contempt for enthusiasm; and that it should be so is what must be expected from the nature of their employment, for they are ever in communion with the great minds of the past, of men whom death has placed beyond envy, whose names time has rendered venerable, and whose faults their ignorance of contemporary circumstance prevents them from perceiving. They have studied the means by which these men, most of them persecuted as innovators in their own day, obtained empire over the minds of their fellows, and they rashly decide that those methods must be the best, and lay down rules which unknown influences caused their models unconsciously to observe, as binding on their successors, forgetting that what suits one race, or climate, or age, is unsuited to another—that the object of writers is to interest, impress, or convince, and that the efficacy of their means can

alone be judged by the result of their endeavours.

If the intelligence of critics were at all equal to their learning, they would doubtless soon perceive that, in their abhorrence of all that is new, they are as illogically inconsistent as they are illiberal, for they are ever found among the most slavish admirers of an innovator, provided only the system introduced by him has already taken root, provided they can look upon him as another master to be studied, not as a too-clever pupil to be repressed; and, above all, provided the grave has closed over him, and Death, by rendering it impossible for their opposition to harass, or for their hatred to hurt, has forbidden them to entertain hopes of drawing upon themselves some reflection of his glory by provoking his resentment, and tempting him to send forth his ennobling hand for their chastisement. Doubtless those who now cheerfully admit the superiority of Bacon and Locke as philosophers to Aristotle, would have been loudest in their denunciations of the heterodoxy of those writers had they lived

when their works first appeared. Doubtless many who now exhaust their vocabulary to express their admiration of Shakespeare, would have racked their brains with equal vigour to find abusive epithets sufficiently strong to convey their indignation at his originality had they lived before he too had become a classic.

Moreover critics, in thus despising originality, show themselves as ignorant of the lessons of history as they are inconsistent in their judgments, for history records no single instance of a great man who was not an innovator. The great of every age are those who first perceive that its intellectual atmosphere is not the same as that which animated their predecessors, that circumstances have altered, and that the wise must alter too; nor do the great study the annals of the past that, by copying its methods, they may reproduce its achievements and earn an echo of its praise, but rather that they may profit by its experience to avoid its errors, that by observing the processes by which its greatness was attained they may learn to build upon the foundation bequeathed to them such con-

tinuations of the design as may enable them to claim for their own age the glory of being one of progress also.

The instances in which critical intolerance of originality has injured mankind by hampering with opposition the zeal of great innovators, and so by putting off the time when their brethren might benefit by their discoveries, are frequent indeed. Socrates was forced to drink the fatal cup because he was suspected of not believing in the personality of the numerous gods and goddesses of the Greek mythology; Galileo was persecuted because he maintained that the sun did not move round the earth; and Columbus was deemed mad because he promised that he would fetch the wealth of the Indies from beyond the mysterious ocean which washed the western shores of Spain. In literature, too, Shakespeare has been condemned because his drama is not identical in construction with that of the Greeks, because he did not observe "unities" of which neither Æschylus nor Sophocles ever dreamt for their trilogies, as the plays belonging to them were exhibited one after another,

may be considered dramas in three acts, and all the poets of that brilliant revival of energy in literature which commenced towards the end of the last century came successively under the displeasure of the conservative critics, by whom the tame correctness of the imitators of Pope was held to be the *summum bonum* in poetry.

And if critics whose established reputation must have recommended caution in the utterance of their opinions, to whom it must have been ruin to be convicted of short-sightedness or of want of penetration, if they have almost invariably opposed originality with all the weight of their learning, with all the power with which public confidence had armed them, how much more is it to be expected that the same will be found to be the case among those who, being anonymous, are protected from the disgrace attaching to mistakes, and who may without danger reach the hand of friendship and offer the incense of homage to the conqueror, whose first efforts to burst his natal obscurity they endeavoured to repress, whose originality they visited with scorn, whose

grand presumption they presumed to rebuke. We are all familiar with the sarcasms by which these anonymous critics express their scorn of contemporary genius, and condemn all attempts at revolt from arbitrary rules, as insults to those from whose practice the principles were deduced, forgetting that it is impossible to advance against a modern writer any argument of this sort which might not have been applied with equal justice to the greatest of his predecessors at some period of their development.

This intolerance of originality which in inferior critics is to be despised, in the powerful is to be lamented, for its effect is to retard progress, to cripple invention, and by constantly directing the public mind to the contemplation of the past, to prevent men from perceiving the greatness of the present, and the prospect of the still more dazzling greatness of the future, thus depriving them of the most powerful motive for exertion, the most honourable pretext for content.

Incapacity for appreciating the spirit of their age.

To illustrate the apparently inevitable incapacity of critics for appreciating the spirit of their age, or for distinguishing its giants, I shall select from the numerous instances which crowd upon my memory, those of Byron, Wordsworth and Shelley, for they may be regarded as the representatives of three great classes into which, owing to the disturbance consequent on the French Revolution, most thinking men of the time were divided;—Byron, of the turbulent destroyers who, rebelling from the despotism of customs, could only see their absurdity, and restless under the restraint of established institutions, desired to sweep them away reckless if the order which they maintained were to be replaced by chaos and confusion; Wordsworth, of the timid whose instincts drove them to take refuge from the turmoil of change in communion with the immutable regularity, the peaceful solemnity of nature; and Shelley, of the far-seeing and self-sacrificing who recognised

that mankind was passing through a momentous struggle, who knew that they would come forth from it victorious, would enter upon a new phase of grander and nobler development, and who quivered with eagerness to commence the task of reconstruction.

Byron began his literary career by the publication of his "Hours of Idleness," a collection of juvenile poems in which though most of his biographers affect to think differently, any candid reader of modern capacity should have at once recognised the promise of his future greatness, and the most unmistakable skill in the management of language and of versification. This volume was furiously attacked by the "Edinburgh Review," and the attack provoked a retaliation which secured for the intended victim triumph and attention for the critic's ridicule and contempt. Thus criticism had displayed its wonted want of discernment, and had worked incalculable mischief by confirming in the poet's mind that unhealthy misanthropical tendency which his preface had already exhibited, and with which all his subsequent poetry is tainted, but the critics were by

no means satisfied with their work. After this first lesson they indeed became more cautious in approaching so formidable an antagonist, and many even retracted former censure, and began to praise where they feared to condemn, just as sneaking ushers truckle to the bullies among their pupils, but they were only biding their time, and when sympathy with a deserting wife, and criminal belief in unproved charges, placed them in the majority against him, they once more gave tongue boldly, and crept forward to pay off old scores, and to join their voices to the cry which drove their ancient foe to waste his life in exile and his superb genius in sneers.

The utter want of appreciation which was Wordsworth's fate while he lived is notorious. He was not considered by the critical bench as even worthy of condemnation. So entirely did they fail to understand his writings that they scarcely condescended to change their laughter to sneers, when his perseverance began to earn from the public some share of the fame which posterity has heaped upon him, and yet his poem on the "Education of Nature," and his

“Ode on Intimations of Immortality” would alone entitle him to rank among our greatest poets had he not also left us hundreds of other gems almost as purely beautiful as the two just mentioned.

It is however in the case of Shelley that we see the most unmistakable evidence of critical ignorance, the clearest proof of the injury to the public which critics can inflict; for the moon when she moves among the subject-stars is not more majestically indifferent to the bay-ing of curs than was Shelley to the derision of his judges—nor could he stoop to inflict upon them chastisement which would have drawn public attention to himself by scattering the dense mists of stupidity which concealed his glory, and who shall estimate the injury done to the public of that day by the critics who hid from them that they were in the presence of a man who towered over all his contemporaries as the Peak of Teneriffe towers over the tumbling waves which toss around its base, of a man who united every quality that is most admirable to every attribute that is most sublime? Who shall redeem Britain from the

shame that her mother's heart sent forth no cry of anguish when the dark waters of the Mediterranean closed over the wondrous brain, the glorious manhood, and the unfulfilled destinies of a son for whom, save Shakespeare and Milton, she has produced no peer?

So great has the power of critics been to dim the splendour of Shelley's fame that even now there are still to be heard some discordant voices marring the harmony of the tumult of admiration for his genius which has begun to swell. Thus we find Mr. Matthew Arnold, in that "Essay on Criticism" in which he talks so much nonsense about "streams of new ideas," and "natural magic," suggesting that Shelley should have been a musician not a poet, and drawing a comparison between him and Keats, the great master and the promising pupil, to the disparagement of the former. Thus we are told by Mr. Shaw that Shelley's poetry is obscure, whereas its greatest charm is the glittering clearness, the marvellous precision with which he has expressed thoughts that many who have been considered masters of language must have left untold; and the same critic

places "Alastor," a juvenile composition in many respects inferior to "Queen Mab," above such masterpieces as "The Cenci," the "Adonais," and the "Prometheus Unbound," and moreover mentions as a cause for lamentation that Shelley was possessed by his genius instead of possessing it, whereas Madame De Staël, assuredly an authority few can afford to despise, has said that a poet is inferior to his inspiration and must lose it if he pause to judge.* But Mr. Shaw's most remarkable utterance in criticism is the avowal that he fails to understand the mystery and abstract meaning of "The Sensitive Plant," and it is impossible to account for the incapacity except on the supposition that the Author of the "Manuel," now generally used for "cramming" purposes, was not only stupid to a degree rare even among those whose profession it is to rob history of its interest, study of its use, and to condense knowledge into an indigestible mass for reception by youthful minds, but was

* "Le poète est inférieur à l'inspiration qui l'anime et ne peut la juger sans la perdre."—*L'Allemagne*.

also very superficially educated, in fact positively ignorant of literature, for the " Sensitive Plant " is as free from obscurity as any poem in existence, and every cultivated Briton must deem it worthy cause for pride that he speaks the language in which it was written.

Remedy for the Evil.

Seeing, then, that Anonymous Criticism has exercised so injurious an influence in the past it is necessary to suggest some remedy for the future ; and in the case of the more prominent critics, as with the obscure, the remedy is, in my opinion, **THAT THEY SHOULD CEASE TO BE ANONYMOUS**—for the earnest and honourable members of the critical profession, and I would fain think that they form the majority, would undoubtedly hail with delight a change which would increase their dignity, and enable them to earn for themselves a reputation beyond the interested circle of their employers, while the careless and unprincipled would soon learn that, in the

utterance of their opinions they must adopt caution, and at least pretend to honesty ; moreover, if the public could contrast the obscurity of many reviewers with the celebrity of the reviewed the decisions of the former would be taken for what they are worth, would gradually cease to be read, and thus the proprietors of the now valuable faculty for condemning, in lame antithesis, what does not suit their tastes, or come within the limit of their comprehensions, would either be obliged to explain the grounds on which their judgments are formed, or to seek some other employment in which the exercise of their talents might be less injurious to public interests. We should then find the great original writers themselves gradually assuming the critical jurisdiction, and bringing all the discernment taught by their own experience, and all the influence arising from their own achievements, to the assistance of the deserving, and to the pitiless exposure of those who now procure employment by intrigue and retain it by corruption. Moreover, as the great writers would thus

have an interesting, useful, and profitable employment for those intervals during which the invention remains in abeyance from exhaustion, it would be no longer necessary for them to issue those works corresponding to the pictures which painters style their pot-boilers, on which the artist in neither calling condescends to bestow any of his best touches, but for which he expects his reputation will procure him a sale. Works like those periodical volumes of obscure obscenity which come to us from the author of the "Atalanta," like the "Gareth and Lynette" and "Queen Mary" of the poet of Guinevere,—works whose publication is an injury to the author's reputation if not to his revenue, an insult to the national intelligence, a libel upon the nation's taste.



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"We recognise all through the touches of an artist; everywhere bud out signs of natural genius. We find no flaw in the plot nor contradiction in its vivid and varied scenes. The chief characters are drawn with skill and vigour. The interest of the reader is never suffered to lag for want of tragic contrast, and he feels when the words of the poem breath of peace and beauty, that he is not far from the crisis of horror and death."—*Tyrone Constitution.*

Extracts from Notices of 'Joan of Arc.'

“‘Joan of Arc’ ne manque pas de valeur, le vers est harmonieux, coulant, et facile. La monotonie de la rime est coupée fort à propos par des vers blancs d’une large facture qui se prêtent admirablement à la phrase épique. Ce poème fait honneur à son auteur. Il y a de l’ampleur, de la verve, de la couleur.”—*Siècle*.

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“Very beautiful and highly poetical. We trust we may see the successful poems. We cannot help congratulating Trinity College on the poetical talents of its students. The author has not come to his full power, but in his work there is great promise. He has our best wishes to attain an honoured place among our poets.”—*Poets’ Magazine*.

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